Is the Addict’s Drug-Seeking Behaviour Rational?

Introduction

The question of whether an addict’s drug-seeking behaviour is rational presents deep philosophical questions surrounding human agency and self-control. Addiction has long been a topic of debate across a wide array of disciplines, with its rationality – or lack thereof – often contested. In traditional works, addiction has been framed as a moral failing or brain disease, both emphasising a loss of control or autonomy. However, Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy’s (1988) theory of rational addiction challenges these notions and suggests that drug-seeking behaviour may, in fact, align with rational decision-making, thus raising the fundamental question: is the addict’s drug-seeking behaviour rational?

Rationality can be understood as a quality of being by logic or the pursuit of one’s goals based on preferences and future-orientated decision-making. Addicts under Becker and Murphy’s (1988) framework appear to meet for rationality, seeming to weigh out the consequences and benefits of their actions. Although Edmund Henden’s (2016) analysis of self-control argues that addiction entails a failure to act in accordance with long-term, primary values, undermining the traditional notions of rationality. This is supported by the works of Bennett Foddy and Julian Savulescu (2010), as they emphasise an addict’s autonomy to pursue their immediate pleasures, raising further questions about whether this autonomy equates to rationality.

Thesis statement

This essay will explore the rationality of addiction, arguing that whether or not the addict’s drug-seeking behaviour is rational is directly correlated to the definition of rationality. While it can be understood as rational in certain theoretical frameworks, addiction challenges conventional understandings of rationality.

The rational addiction model (Becker and Murphy, 1988) serves as a framework for understanding addiction as a form of “utility-maximising” behaviour. Becker and Murphy (1988) argue that addicts evaluate the costs and benefits of their actions as forward-looking decision-makers in the context of both the present and the future. A key feature of this theory is the concept of “adjacent complementarity”, where past consumption of an addictive substance increases the utility of present consumption, reinforcing a vicious cycle that escalates an addict’s usage over time. This

framework explains processes associated with addiction, such as binging or sudden withdrawal, as they align with the addict's goal of getting the most out of their choices in accordance with changes in circumstances or incentives. An example of this is the addict's usage of substances correlating to their price, consuming less when costs increase, suggesting the ability to adjust their behaviours accordingly in response to external factors (Becker and Murphy, 1988). However, this view has been subject to criticism from philosophers like Henden (2016), challenging the assumption of "stable preferences" that underpin this theory. Henden (2016) argues that addicts focus on the immediate rewards rather than the long-term effects, making their choices inconsistent and misaligned with their lasting goals. A likening for short-term gratification creates patterns of behaviour that, while initially may appear rational, essentially fail to align with broader values. Neil Levy's (2013) emphasis on the social contexts of addiction further highlights how external pressures – such as socioeconomic disadvantage or limited access to resources – can distort an addict's ability to make truly informed and rational decisions, making their drug-seeking behaviour irrational.

While Becker and Murphy's (1988) model portrays addiction as rational utility maximization, it does not adequately account for the internal conflicts that characterise addictive behaviour. Henden (2016) highlights that addiction involves failures of self-control and undermining the coherence of an addict's choices. Drawing on the concept of "hyperbolic discounting" (where addicts prioritise immediate awards over long-term health or financial stability), a misalignment is created in which value-based self-control and agency is compromised. Foddy and Savulescu (2010) offer a different perspective, emphasising the autonomy of addicts in pursuing their immediate desires, arguing that addiction does not inherently undermine rationality as drug-seeking behaviour can reflect genuine preferences for momentary pleasure. However, this view is complicated when considered with Henden's (2016) insights. Shifts in judgement are observed in addicts - where an addict alternates between abstaining from drugs and succumbing to their cravings – suggesting that autonomy is not consistent in addiction and that addiction itself is not linear. These shifts in judgement highlight the addict's behaviour that cannot be described as fully rational as it does not maintain coherence with their long-term values. This tension between autonomy and self-control reveals a limitation in defining addiction as a rational process. While addicts may appear to be making logical choices in the short term, their difficulty in acting in accordance with their fundamental values and morals suggests a reduced rationality that draws attention to the internal conflicts associated with addiction.

While much of the debate around addiction focuses on the internal conflicts experienced in the decision-making process, Levy (2013) emphasises the role of external factors in shaping addictive behaviour. He argues that addiction can't be explained through an individual agency or neurotic dysfunction alone, but the social and environmental contexts in which addicts live must be considered. Socioeconomic disadvantage and limited access to resources can significantly influence an individual's choices. Some people turn to drugs as a coping mechanism, looking for short-term relief, and in such cases, their drug-seeking behaviour appears rational within the constraints of their environment but reflects situational pressures rather than genuine autonomy. Levy's (2013) approach challenges the rational addiction model's assumption that addicts make informed and consistent decisions. While Becker and Murphy highlight the "forward-looking maximisation" (1988) of addiction, Levy argues that external barriers can restrict an addict's ability to act on their fundamental goals. This reflects broader societal issues and struggles as, more often than not, external, environmental factors have a significant impact on the behaviour of human beings and, therefore, should be taken into account when considering the rationality of addiction and drug-seeking behaviour. This view suggests that this is a product of constrained circumstances rather than a deliberate, 'utility-maximizing' choice (Becker and Murphy, 1988). Situating addiction within a broader social framework, the structural inequalities and environmental factors can be seen to complicate rationality in a way that offers an explanation for the addict's drug-seeking behaviour.

Another perspective on addiction is Foddy and Savulescu's (2010) "Liberal account of addiction", which challenges traditional notions of autonomy and self-control, arguing that addictive behaviour doesn't reflect a loss of autonomy or rationality. Instead, they suggest that addiction is a pursuit of pleasure, similar to other human appetites. Biological processes that undercut addiction are not fundamentally "distinct" from those that are driven by "normal, non-addicted pleasure-seeking behaviour", such as sex or sugar. They argue addictive desires should be regarded as part of human nature and behaviour as the pharmacological process that forms addictions, "the exact same process that forms a person's likes and dislikes of any pleasurable stimulus." (Foddy and Savulescu, 2010). This understanding of addiction as a greater degree of an individual's 'like' of something offers a more nuanced approach to this issue that supports Becker and Murphy's (1988) narrative surrounding addiction and its rationality.

Central to Foddy and Savulescu's argument (2010) is a rejection of both the "disease view" and the "willpower view." The disease view portrays

addiction as a neurological dysfunction that hijacks the brain's reward systems, rendering the addict incapable of rational decision-making. Foddy and Savulescu critique this perspective by pointing out that the same mechanisms involved in drug addiction are activated by normal pleasure-seeking activities. Labelling these processes as a "disease" reflects societal taboos surrounding pleasure-seeking rather than scientific evidence. Similarly, the willpower view, which presents addiction as a failure of self-control, is undermined by their assertion that addicts act on preferences they genuinely endorse, making their behaviour autonomous rather than coerced. This liberal account of addiction challenges the claims of Henden (2016) and Levy's (2013) emphasis on social constraints and impaired self-control, suggesting they don't always regret their choices and value the pleasure and relief provided by the drugs they seek more than the potential harm. This emphasises the autonomy-centred account of addiction, reframes it as a rational pursuit of desire, and entirely disregards the potential impact of external factors on the behaviour of an addict.

Opposing perspectives on addiction and the rationality of behaviour of those disturbed by it highlight a pull between two perspectives: while frameworks emphasise utility maximisation and autonomy, others focus on self-control failures and external constraints. Reconciling these views demands a nuanced understanding of rationality, accounting for an individual's agency and the contextual factors that could influence them. Becker and Murphy's (1988) rational addiction model provides a foundation for how addicts may behave in a calculated manner to get the most out of the short-term. However, this becomes limited when viewing addiction through the lens of internal conflicts, as underlined by Henden (2016). Addiction cannot be fully understood without recognising the impact of external pressures on decision-making and constrained choices. Levy's (2013) argument challenges the assumption that addicts act autonomously and with full rationality, as argued by Foddy and Savulescu (2010), as while drug-seeking behaviour reflects a preference for short-term pleasure, it is often shaped by limited options, calling into question whether these choices are truly rational.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the rationality of the addict's drug-seeking behaviour is not an absolute quality and defies a one-dimensional answer. While Becker and Murphy's (1988) rational addiction model offers a compelling framework for understanding addiction, it falls short in accounting for the internal conflicts and external pressures that shape addiction. Henden's (2016) emphasis on impaired self-control highlights how addiction creates a misalignment between an individual's immediate desires and long-term

goals, signifying a bounded rationality. Integrating these perspectives makes it clear that addiction is both a product of rational decision-making within certain circumstances and a condition marked by internal conflicts. This more nuanced understanding highlights the importance of addressing both the personal and structural dimensions of addiction in order to grasp its complexities and form compassionate responses. Recognising this complexity acknowledges the agency of the addict and the structural barriers that shape their behaviours.

Reference list

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